

40 years since the People Power ouster of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines

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February marked 40 years since a mass demonstration of millions of Filipinos in Manila, combined with a coup plot by a cohort of disgruntled officers, ousted the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. The event, celebrated as People Power or the EDSA Revolution, has been endlessly mythologized as the rebirth of “Philippine democracy,” but it in fact only reorganized and preserved capitalist rule under new political forms.

The regime that fell in February 1986 was the product of the postwar Philippine bourgeois order and its domination by US imperialism. Marcos ruled through systematic terror: thousands were executed extrajudicially, tens of thousands tortured and imprisoned, and entire communities subjected to military repression. These abuses were not the excesses of a rogue autocrat; they were the methods of a state that Washington armed and financed as a key pillar of its Cold War architecture in Southeast Asia. The US secured the use of Clark and Subic military bases and integrated the Philippine military into its global counterinsurgency operations.

By the early 1980s, however, this order was collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. When Marcos took office in 1965, roughly 28 percent of the population lived below the poverty line and unemployment stood around 9 percent; when he fled into exile on 25 February 1986, some 70 percent of Filipinos were living below the poverty line and roughly one in three workers was either unemployed or underemployed. The economy contracted sharply in 1984 and 1985, wiping out years of per capita income gains, while capital flight accelerated in the aftermath of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr.’s assassination in August 1983. Aquino’s murder, carried out on the airport tarmac as he returned from exile, detonated mass outrage; official inquiries pointed to a conspiracy within the security forces, but the ultimate authors were never identified, and the crime remains politically unresolved.

The nearly three years between Aquino’s assassination and Marcos’s fall saw mounting strikes, urban protests and rural unrest under conditions of deepening social misery. Sections of the business elite and the Catholic Church began to distance themselves from the palace. Washington, fearful that the crisis could escape its control, pushed for a managed transition. Marcos’s decision to call a snap presidential election for February 1986 was a calculated gamble: he intended to secure international legitimacy through a controlled contest, while the US sought to channel explosive social anger into the framework of bourgeois elections.

The poll was openly fraudulent. Corazon Aquino, wife of the assassinated politician, claimed victory and Marcos proclaimed himself reelected. At the same time, a factional split in the armed forces burst into the open. Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Constabulary chief Fidel Ramos, linked to the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, rebelled against the palace but initially commanded only a fraction of the military. Their mutiny would almost certainly have been crushed had it remained an intra-elite confrontation. It was transformed into what became known as People Power only when hundreds of thousands of ordinary Filipinos responded to appeals from the Catholic hierarchy and opposition figures to surround the rebel camps.

For four days, masses of workers, urban poor, students and sections of the middle class formed human barricades along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue to shield the mutinous units from loyalist assault. Confronted with this sea of unarmed demonstrators, key commanders refused orders to fire on the crowds or storm the camps. The regime’s military base disintegrated, and the United States stepped in to organize Marcos’s evacuation and the installation of Corazon Aquino. The incoming administration fused social-democratic and Stalinist figures with landed and business elites and the very generals who had enforced martial law. Its first acts—including the appointment of Ramos as chief of staff and Enrile as defense secretary, and the creation of the Presidential Commission on Good Government to manage, rather than overturn, the Marcos plunder—made clear that the social foundations of the dictatorship would remain intact.

From the outset, then, People Power expressed a fundamental contradiction. For millions, it was the opening of a revolutionary situation, the promise of a break with dictatorship, poverty and imperialist domination. For the ruling class and its imperialist patrons, it was a means to defuse a potentially revolutionary upheaval, transfer power from one wing of the oligarchy to another, and stabilize the state. It is this contradiction that throws into sharp relief the role played by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its mass organizations, above all BAYAN and Gabriela, in disarming the working class and preserving bourgeois rule.

BAYAN and Gabriela did not arise as independent class organizations of the working class and oppressed. In keeping with its Stalinist program, the CPP insisted that the tasks of revolution in the Philippines were not yet socialist, but national and democratic in character. In this limited first stage of the Philippine revolution, an alliance with so-called progressive capitalists was politically essential. The armed struggle of the CPP’s New People’s Army (NPA) in the countryside was being waged to these ends.

BAYAN and Gabriela were founded in the early 1980s as national democratic alliances, explicitly designed to bind militant layers of workers, peasants, women and youth to sections of the elite opposition—Church figures, professional associations, landowners and business interests hostile to Marcos but committed to the maintenance of capitalism. BAYAN, headed on paper by Lorenzo Tañada, a leading figure in the elite opposition to Marcos, brought together CPP-aligned forces with bourgeois and petty-bourgeois anti-Marcos groups. Gabriela played the same role in the women’s movement, marrying militant rhetoric against dictatorship and patriarchy to an alliance with the elite opposition and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. It counted among its leaders future president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Within this framework, the 1986 snap election was never discussed as an opportunity to mount an independent campaign of the working class against all factions of the ruling elite. That perspective did not enter into the calculations of the CPP, BAYAN, or Gabriela. The entire debate unfolded inside a shared premise: that the central task was to strengthen

and profit from an alliance with the “anti?dictatorship” wing of the capitalist class. The argument over boycott versus participation was, in substance, a tactical dispute within these organizations and the wider Stalinist milieu over how best to deepen ties with Aquino, the church and business interests—not over whether such an alliance should exist.

One current, which prevailed in the CPP leadership and in BAYAN’s formal line, advocated a boycott. It pointed to earlier abstentions in the 1981 and 1984 elections as supposed proofs that boycotts could delegitimize Marcos’s staged contests. Convinced that Marcos would remain in office through fraud, these forces argued that another boycott would expose the futility of elections under dictatorship and, when Aquino’s middle?class base saw their hopes defeated, “push moderates” into alignment with the “progressive left.” The opposing current, increasingly influential among BAYAN leaders and figures such as Satur Ocampo, insisted that open support for Aquino was the better way to cultivate her social base and secure an institutional role in a post?Marcos government. Both wings agreed that their horizon was an alliance with the capitalist opposition; they differed only over whether that alliance was best pursued by temporarily standing apart from Aquino’s campaign, or by entering into it.

As the campaign proceeded, the boycott line rapidly revealed its contradictions. BAYAN, which had become a key vehicle for channeling anti?Marcos sentiment, particularly among non?communist activists and church?linked groups, began to shed supporters who felt compelled to back Aquino or risk political isolation. Tañada himself publicly stepped aside from his post at BAYAN’s head to throw his support behind Aquino. Internal memoranda from senior cadres warned that the boycott would “boomerang,” not because it betrayed the independent interests of the working class, but because it threatened to leave the CPP and its fronts more isolated from the middle?class opposition they were striving to woo.

When Marcos was finally toppled, the consequences of this orientation were brutal. BAYAN and Gabriela had oscillated between abstention from the snap election and a desperate effort to maintain their place within the elite?dominated opposition. In a May 1986 self?criticism, the flagship publication of the CPP, *Ang Bayan*, conceded that “where the people saw in the February 7 snap election a chance to deliver a crippling blow on the Marcos regime,” the leadership had dismissed it as an empty intra?elite battle, and that when hundreds of thousands “moved spontaneously but resolutely to oust the hated regime,” the party and its forces “were not there to lead them.”

BAYAN and company, however, did more than merely stand aside. They actively defused a revolutionary situation, stabilizing People Power in the interests of a layer of the bourgeoisie and the state with whom they sought to ally. Lean Alejandro, then secretary general of BAYAN, later gave a frank account of the organization’s conduct over those four days. He described how BAYAN members were “more inside than outside Crame [the military camp where the officers heading the military coup were holed up],” in direct and continuous contact with Enrile and Ramos, who were acutely aware that their mutiny would have been crushed without the protective shield of the crowds. As the masses of People Power stormed Malacañang presidential palace, BAYAN was instrumental in preserving order and protecting the troops loyal to Marcos. BAYAN shielded the soldiers from the masses and the soldiers, Alejandro noted, preferred to capitulate to BAYAN contingents rather than to openly pro?Aquino forces, trusting them to guarantee their safety.

This conduct was not an aberration; it flowed logically from BAYAN’s popular front perspective. The organization functioned as a mediator between the masses and sections of the state and elite opposition, working to ensure that the uprising would culminate in an orderly transfer of power that left the core of the armed forces and the capitalist state intact. The personal fate of Alejandro himself is a tragic condensation of this trajectory. Having devoted his energies to binding the mass movement to

the “anti?dictatorship” wing of the bourgeoisie and shielding sections of the military during Edsa, he was assassinated barely two years later, in 1987, by the very state security forces whose continuity BAYAN and the CPP had helped to guarantee. His murder, in the midst of the Aquino administration and in the wake of the massacre of demonstrating peasants, and repeated coup plots, stands as a terrible indictment of the illusion that the working class and radicalized youth could secure their rights and lives by aligning with one or another faction of the capitalist class and its military.

The four decades since Edsa have vindicated the Trotskyist assessment that the ouster of Marcos, conducted under the leadership of the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and social democratic allies, could not resolve the fundamental democratic and social tasks confronting the Philippine masses. Successive administrations—Aquino, Ramos, Estrada, Arroyo, Aquino III, Duterte and now Marcos Jr.—have differed in rhetoric and style, but not in their essential program. They have protected capitalist property interests, enforced low?wage exploitation in export zones and precarious service jobs, maintained landlord domination of the countryside and bound the country to the shifting strategic needs of US imperialism, and in particular its escalating drive to war against China.

Under these conditions, Philippine bourgeois politics has undergone the same degeneration seen internationally. Parties have disintegrated into personal electoral machines and family franchises. Electoral contests are fights between rival oligarchic clans, mediated by hired political technologists and social?media operators. The language of “democracy,” “good governance” and “human rights” has become the stock?in?trade of factions that, once in office, preside over capitalist exploitation and the deployment of the police and military against workers, peasants and the urban poor. The assassination squads of the Duterte “war on drugs,” the massacre of farmers and activists, and the criminalization of dissent are the direct heirs of martial law.

In this context, People Power has ossified into a bankrupt model of Marian religious devotion and popular front politics. Its symbolism—the rosary, yellow ribbons, candle?lit vigils—appeals above all to middle?class layers and the NGO milieu. It is deployed as a manageable apparatus for altering the alignment of elite factions, not as a means of overturning capitalist property or imperialist domination. Commemorations of 1986, like those held this February, are saturated with historical falsification. They erase the role of US imperialism, downplay the conspiracy within the officer corps, and suppress the betrayals of the Stalinist and social?democratic leaderships. They present Edsa as the birth of “Philippine democracy,” and blame the masses for having supposedly squandered its blessings by foolishly voting for corrupt politicians.

The rise of Rodrigo Duterte and the electoral victory of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. are not a repudiation of Edsa; they are its outcome. Decades of broken promises, unrelieved poverty and blatant corruption under the “democratic” regimes of Aquino, Ramos and their successors have produced a deep and justified disillusionment among workers and youth. The liberal opposition, having presided over privatization, militarization and the rehabilitation of the Marcos clan, is incapable of offering any alternative beyond a nostalgic appeal to the failed model of People Power. The CPP and its national democratic organizations, have been thoroughly exposed by their opportunist alliances, above all their support for and participation in cabinet of the murderous Duterte government.

Internationally, this experience is part of a global process: the erosion of any semblance of democratic norms under conditions of intensifying social inequality and imperialist war. From Trump in the United States to Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary and beyond, far right and fascist forces are on the rise. The old reformist parties of capitalism have collapsed or been transformed into hollow shells. The forms of parliamentary democracy are increasingly incompatible with the demands of finance capital and the preparations for world war. The ritual

invocation of “People Power” in the Philippines is a local expression of this worldwide effort to salvage a discredited order by repackaging it as the highest expression of the popular will.

Forty years on, the central lesson of People Power is not that the masses “once saved democracy” and must now do so again, but that no advance is possible so long as their struggles remain chained to any faction of the bourgeoisie. In 1986, millions of workers, peasants and youth demonstrated immense courage, but they were politically subordinated—above all through the agency of the Stalinist CPP and the social?democratic left—to Aquino, the Church and sections of the military. The result was the preservation of capitalist rule and the preparation of new disasters.

The way forward lies in the conscious and organized assertion of the political independence of the working class. This requires an irreconcilable break with all factions of the Philippine bourgeoisie and with their political instruments, including the CPP and its national democratic fronts. It demands the construction of a new revolutionary leadership based on an international socialist program: the expropriation of the oligarchs and foreign capital, the placing of the major industries, banks and land under democratic workers’ control, the abolition of landlordism, and the withdrawal of all imperialist forces and bases.

Such a perspective cannot be realized within the confines of the nation?state. The Philippine working class is part of a global class whose struggles are erupting on every continent. The fight against the Marcos dynasty, against authoritarian rule and against the decaying edifice of post?Edsa “democracy” must be linked to the worldwide movement of workers and youth against war, fascism and social inequality. The decisive task posed by the 40th anniversary of People Power is the building of a Philippine section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which alone embodies the historical lessons of the struggle against Stalinism and the fight for genuine socialism.



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